

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Thematic Analysis and Poetic Inquiry of Educators' Meaning-Making and Sense-Making of Social Justice

Ishwarya Narayanan Iyer<sup>1,\*</sup> and Sridhar Ramachandran<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Education, Indiana University, USA*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Informatics, Indiana University Southeast, USA*

**Abstract:** This paper presents a qualitative study that explores how educators in higher education construct their meaning of social justice. The data consist of transcripts of personal stories shared by three subjects in a public panel discussion. The data analysis employs two complementary methods: thematic analysis and poetic inquiry and analysis. The thematic analysis identifies two main themes: reflection from life events and heightened self-awareness, which illustrate how the subjects' life experiences and perceptions have shaped their understanding of social justice. The poetic inquiry and analysis transform the subjects' voices into narrative and lyrical poems that evoke the emotional and experiential aspects of their stories. The paper explores the consequences of the findings for campus programming and social justice education. This paper also reflects on the benefits and challenges of using thematic analysis and poetic inquiry as qualitative research methods. The dual approach illuminates the complexities of social justice in education, contributing to a more holistic understanding.

**Keywords:** qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis, poetic inquiry and analysis, social justice, lived experiences and perception

## 1. Introduction

To yield meaningful and usable insights from the data (qualitative), it is vital that the qualitative data analysis be carried out in a thorough, rigorous, and methodical manner with ample detail to earn the trust of the readers. Moreover, for the findings from the data analysis to be accepted as credible, it is important for qualitative researchers to show/disclose how and whether their analysis followed a precise, consistent, and exhaustive procedure/protocol. To that end, in this research work, we start by first briefly discussing the relevance and context of our pilot research for which we have analyzed data including our research question (RQ). Thereafter, we will briefly discuss our data analysis methods of choice for our data – thematic analysis (TA) supplemented with a poetic inquiry and analysis (PIA). Supplementing the primary data analysis (TA) with a supplementary data analysis (a new lens) of the same data will help boost the credibility (and thus trustworthiness and usefulness) of the findings and conclusions drawn from the data analysis. Adding a supplementary data analysis will also assure the readers that the research is carried out in a thorough, rigorous, and methodical manner with ample detail to earn the trust of the readers. We will then conclude this paper with our tentative findings and end this document with a concluding discussion about future directions for our research inquiry.

## 2. Relevance and Context of our Research

While a majority of the investigations and discourses in education research have focused on (studied and reported) how students construct, understand, negotiate, and renegotiate their understanding about social justice [1, 2], it is now important to flip the gaze and investigate how educators (teachers) understand (sense-making) and make-sense (meaning-making) of what social justice means to them. This will help us move away from focusing solely on students as the population that is in need of support and resources (deficit mindset [3]) and instead help us more thoroughly understand the social realities of the educational spaces in higher education and deduce critical inferences about these racialized spaces from whence the educators operate. Examining the educators' understanding and constructions of meaning-making and sense-making about issues like social justice will provide valuable information (to all stakeholders) regarding the current interventions, programming, and roadblocks (in the local context) in light of the goal for a sustainable and truly inclusive educational environment. The understanding, meaning-making, and sense-making of what constitute social justice are tied to one's perceptions of, lived experiences with, and encounter with power and privilege in conjunction with oppression and marginalization that one has been subjected to as a consequence of the sociocultural circumstances they have been immersed in. While there are several studies that have focused on college students' perceptions and experiences with social justice issues like race [4–8], the dearth of research reporting and sharing about the college/university instructors' perceptions and experiences that

\*Corresponding author: Ishwarya Narayanan Iyer, School of Education, Indiana University, USA. Email: [iniyer@iu.edu](mailto:iniyer@iu.edu)

have shaped their understanding of social justice signals toward a need to conduct research that critically analyzes how college/university instructors have conversations about social justice.

Therefore, the purpose and goal of this pilot research is to “see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences” so that we can come to identify “what is common to the way” the research subjects discuss social justice [9]. Thus, it can be seen that we are interested in finding themes (viz. Social Justice) “of shared meaning organized around a central concept” [9] that is “derived from the data that informs the research” [10]. We are also not simply looking to summarize the data but instead are interested in analyzing to inductively interpret the data and make sense of it. To that end, we found the flexibility, structure, and rigor offered by TA supplemented with a PIA to be a more appropriate data analysis methodology for our research investigation guided by the question:

*How do educators (in higher education settings) construct their meaning of social justice?*

### 3. TA of the Data

Educators at a public, four-year degree-granting public university in Midwest United States were invited to a half-day open and public panel discussion to talk and share about their understanding regarding the concept of social justice. This event was conducted over Zoom, and the entire event was recorded (with participant consent) and is now in the public domain. The event allowed opportunities for the subjects to voluntarily share about their journey and lived experiences in response to the open question “What does social justice mean to you?” The transcribed responses (personal stories) from this publicly shared activity (like an open mic event) are what constitutes the data for our research inquiry and data analysis. Our data consist of 3.5 h of relevant audiovisual data consisting of the personal stories from 3 subjects available in the public domain. For a good quality qualitative analysis, it is necessary to be “able to draw interpretations” that are “consistent with the data that is collected.” TA is capable of ensuring this consistency between the interpretations and the data because it is capable of detecting and identifying “factors or variables that influence any issue generated by the participants” [11]. This is primarily what we are seeking with our research analysis and so TA fits in well with our research goals. Also, the theoretical freedom (and thus more accessible form of analysis,) that TA offers will provide us with the flexibility that we seek so that we can provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of our data [12]. In addition, the “six phases” in the approach to TA by [13] provide a well-structured approach to handling the data analysis that will be very helpful to us toward producing a clear, organized, trustworthy, credible, and reflexive final report [12].

#### 3.1. Our systematic approach toward conducting a trustworthy TA on the data

For our data analysis, we will focus on the method of TA as drafted and shared by Braun and Clarke since it is particularly suited to our research goals (as discussed earlier). The [9, 13, 14] method of analysis consists of six phases where the data analysis is intended to be recursive/cyclic, not a straightforward one, where later stages might cause the researcher to revisit previous stages due to the discovery of new data or the emergence of new themes that warrant additional exploration [10]. Braun and Clarke [14] also explicitly state that their recommendations include “phases” and not “steps” or “rules” because they believe that the researcher is “a situated, insight-bringing, integral component of the analysis” and

that the analysis takes place at the crossroads of the dataset, the research context, and the researcher’s expertise and position. Below, we describe these phases as they relate to our systematic approach towards conducting a trustworthy TA on our data.

##### 3.1.1. Phase 1: *Becoming familiar with the data*

As was discussed earlier in the paper, our data were collected by us from the public domain and so we entered the analysis with some prior knowledge of the data and some initial analytic interests/thoughts. So, following advice, we documented our thoughts, interpretations, and questions (in our reflexive journal) during the data collection and that marked the beginning of our data analysis. It is imperative that the researcher deeply engage with the data to fully comprehend its depth and breadth [13] and so we repeatedly read through our entire data/transcripts in an active way to become very familiar with it before beginning to search for meanings and patterns. Starks and Trinidad [15] urge the researcher to interact with the data analysis as a reliable observer of the narratives within the data, while also maintaining integrity and alertness about their own viewpoints, preconceived notions, and evolving theories. Therefore, taking this advice to heart, we documented our theoretical and reflective thoughts that developed with our immersion with the data, and we kept principles, interests, and evolving understanding about the research topic. To ensure the rigor for Phase 1 of our TA, we followed the advice provided to qualitative researchers by [16] and paid careful attention to ensure the accuracy of the transcription process. We did not use a software for the transcription and instead did it manually, and so every time we read the transcript (when reengaging with our data for data familiarity), we also simultaneously listened to the audio file so that we could re-verify the accuracy of our transcriptions. This was also in alignment with Checkpoint # 1 from the 15-Point Checklist of Criteria for Good TA suggested by Braun and Clarke that suggests that it is important to verify if the data have been transcribed with sufficient detail, and the transcripts have been scrutinized for accuracy. This will guarantee that as we enter the “coding” phase, the data used from this point forward are precise. There were, in total, five instances when we had to edit our transcript for accuracy as a direct result of this re-verification engagement, and this procedure, despite being lengthy, aids us in confirming that the transcript maintains the information we require from the oral account and does so in a way that is authentic to its initial character that includes the use of punctuation to retain the meaning of what was being said. This phase was time-consuming because we had to revisit the verbal data recording several times to check our transcripts to check for accuracy in order to capture the “true” and “original nature” of the verbal account, but it has made us very confident and familiar with our transcribed data.

##### 3.1.2. Phase 2: *Initial codes generation*

This stage commenced after we had thoroughly read and acquainted ourselves with the data and so we entered this phase with having an understanding of what was in the data and why it was interesting to our research. For this phase, we started producing the initial codes from the data and throughout this phase we had to keep revisiting the data many times over to move from the unstructured data to “the development of ideas about what is going on in the data.” Braun and Clarke [13] suggest that during this phase, the researcher should methodically examine the entire data set, giving equal consideration to each piece of data, and pinpoint intriguing elements in the data items that could serve as the foundation for themes throughout the data set. They also

**Table 1**  
**Data extract sample, with codes applied**

Research question	Coded for	Data extract (one of many)
How do people (educators) construct meanings of social justice?	- Participation is community service. - Self-realization - Powerful personal experience or encounter.	“But I very quickly realized something that helping other people is so powerful. And it’s something that is so needed. Easy for me putting spaghetti on a plate and then handing that to you is a mild annoyance. But for the people I was doing it for, some of them, it may have been the best thing that happened to them the whole day.”

**Table 2**  
**Searching for themes – subthemes to primary themes**

Research question	Primary theme	Subtheme	Codes (level 1)
How do people construct meanings of social justice?	Influence of Life Events	- Social Service. - Personal Experiences. - Awakening.	- Participation is community service. - Self-realization - Experiencing firsthand different perspectives - Situation leading to awareness - Giving back to the society - Powerful personal experience or encounter.

emphasize that data accounts that deviate from the main narrative in the analysis should not be overlooked during coding [13]. Consequently, in this phase, we meticulously navigated through the data set, giving equal importance to each data item to identify compelling aspects in the data. This was also in alignment with Checkpoint # 2 from the 15-Point Checklist of Criteria for Good TA suggested by Braun and Clarke that suggests that giving attention to the entirety of the data set will provide the researcher with a valuable orientation to the raw data that can be foundational here forward for all the subsequent steps. Interestingly, we noticed that our subjectivity was in play as we identified patterns and meanings in the data that we then used to come up with descriptive code (see Table 1). We discovered a total of 103 codes at this Phase. We did not use a software program for this and instead did the initial coding manually.

Many research studies have suggested that credibility of the initial codes is improved if the data analysis is conducted by multiple researchers [17, 18]. Taking heed of this advice, we employed peer debriefing for this phase and had our data analyzed for codes by two colleagues from our workplace. We also participated in reflexive journaling during the coding process, which assisted us in observing how our thoughts and concepts developed as we delved deeper into our data.

*3.1.3. Phase 3: The search for themes*

For this phase, we started to analyze our codes (from the entire data set) to start to consider how different codes can be combined to form an overarching theme. This required a lot of going back-and-forth. For example, in our data set, we had to rethink the need for some of our initial codes (like “Brand Awareness”) and whether it was relevant to our inquiry.

We particularly followed the guidance provided in the [19] article, which suggests starting by reviewing the coding produced during Phase 2, from right to left, to confirm the accuracy of the identified data elements, then, evaluating the connection of codes with interview snippets, as well as their pertinence to the study

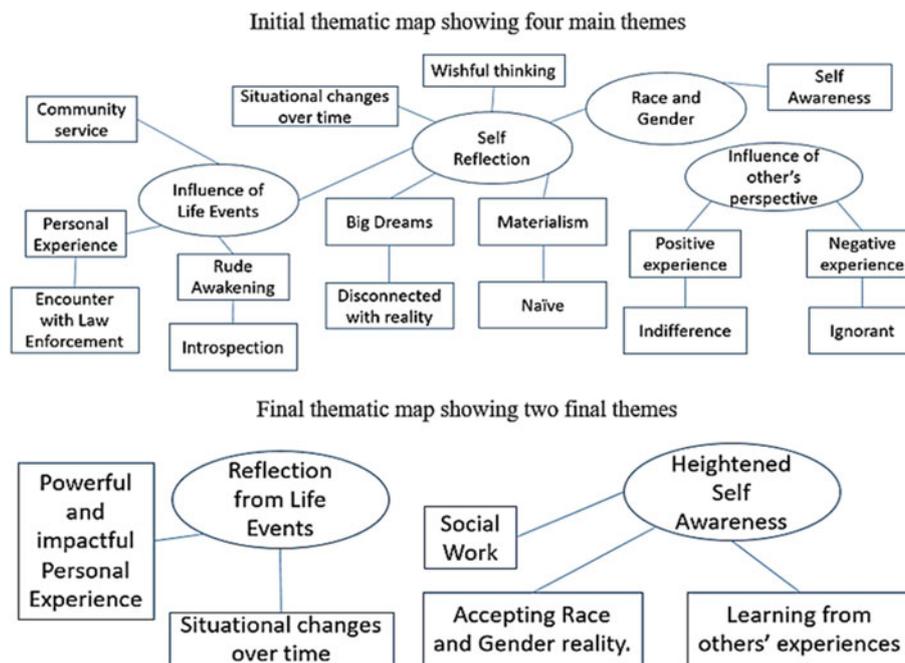
goals. Afterwards, the coded data is organized according to concepts or sequences of words, based on their similarities or patterns. This process is known as theme identification. Following this, the identified themes are examined to further categorize them into subthemes, overarching themes, or groups of themes, as necessary. The material is then reviewed to understand the hierarchical relationships among these themes. This approach was also in alignment with Checkpoint # 3 from the 15-Point Checklist of Criteria for Good TA suggested by [13] that implies that when looking for themes, make sure that the themes have not been derived from a handful of striking examples (an anecdotal approach), but rather the coding process has been exhaustive, inclusive, and all-encompassing. This is important because both code and themes can be tied to more semantic or latent meanings, and when moving from codes to themes, it is important to ensure that researcher has first coded the entire data set and developed a coding framework before looking for potential themes of broader significance within the data. You can see this progression in action when moving from Tables 1 to 2.

*3.1.4. Phase 4: Refining the themes*

In this phase, we initiated by posing questions recommended by [19]: “Is this a theme, subtheme, or code?” Does the theme accurately/adequately reflect the associated data? and is the theme too abstract or complex to comprehend or, on the other hand, is it so specific that it cannot be broadly linked with data? Is there a discernible logic to the hierarchical relationships between themes, subthemes, and codes (i.e., clear differentiation between broader categories) and so on. At this stage, we started to use diagramming to further interrogate the theme(s) to refine them and ascertain whether they exhibit a coherent arrangement/pattern (See Figure 1).

Thereafter, we began to examine the validity of each theme to confirm if the themes were accurately mirroring the meanings evident in the entire data set. Especially useful for this investigation were the questions provided by [20]: “Do the themes make sense? Does the data support the themes? Are we trying to

**Figure 1**  
Thematic maps developed during phase 3 of TA



fit too much into a theme? If themes overlap, are they really separate themes? Are there themes within themes (subthemes)? Are there other themes within the data?” To ensure that the themes reflected the subjects’ voices, we also had to keep returning to the raw data – so this was very time-intensive. This approach (diagramming and questioning) was also in alignment with Checkpoints # 4, 5, and 6 from the 15-Point Checklist of Criteria for Good TA suggested by [13] that suggests that it is important to verify that all applicable extracts for all, and each theme has been assembled and that the themes have been compared with each other and back to the original data set so that themes are internally logically, consistent, and unique. Taking this exhaustive but systematic approach helped us to arrive at two main themes that are significant to the research study question.

**3.1.5. Phase 5 & 6: Specifying and designating themes & compiling the report**

For this phase, following the guidance of [13, 16], we composed “an in-depth analysis for each distinct theme, recognizing the narrative that each theme conveyed while contemplating how each theme integrated into the comprehensive story about the entire data set in correlation” with the RQ. Braun and Clarke’s also suggest that the names of the themes “need to be concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about.” This phase thus marks the final refinement (and thus finalization) of the themes with the aim of identifying the “essence” of what “each theme is about.” Thereafter, we started to investigate the themes using questions provided by [20]: What is the theme expressing? If subthemes exist, how do they interact and associate with the main theme? How do the themes correlate with each other? So, in our analysis, “Reflection from Life Events” is an overarching theme that is rooted in the other themes (serving as a foundational theme). The thematic map shown in Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between the subthemes leading to this main theme and we are including the narrative for “Reflection from Life Events” below.

**3.2. Discussion of the findings from TA**

**3.2.1. Reflection from life events**

Most subjects in this study shared their life stories and talked about how their experiences over time had shaped their understanding about what social justice meant to them. A common subtheme under this overarching theme of “Reflection from Life Events” was the subtheme of “Powerful and Impactful Personal Experiences.” For example, a participant in this public event shared about a life event when he was required to do community service stating:

*“Now the God’s Kitchen is a place in Anytownville where meals are served to the homeless and people that maybe just don’t have the means to eat otherwise. And I walk in on the first day and I’m just kinda all down in the dumps because here’s a Saturday that I could be watching basketball or still sleeping and I have to do this service work.”*

He then shared how the life event was powerful and impactful to him and how it helped him make meaning and sense of what social justice was:

*“I saw people come in with gratitude and people that just were so sincere. And through that period, I realized and I found my signpost that I found my awakening. My awakening was doing for other people. My awakening was using my platform to help others. And that’s what social justice is. It’s working to help others, working to help other people.”*

Another common subtheme under the overarching theme of “Reflection from Life Events” was the subtheme of “Situational changes over time.” For example, a participant in this public event shares about how their economic situation has changed over time leading to new life experiences that have shaped their understanding of social justice. Engaging in reflection the participant shares:

*“Now, 2015 Mark is a lot different than 2022 Mark, be glad you’re meeting this version of me. 2015 Mark, the things that I held of importance in 2015 were material things, things that you could just really grab a hold on. I had a whole closet full of Brooks Brothers*

*shirts and sweaters and monogram everything at the house. I drove a Ford Explorer and it was an old Ford Explorer, but in my mind, I was one step away from getting a new one. Vacationing in wonderful exclusive spots – that was what we were working towards. If my ex-wife was here right now she might say that, well, Mark was kind of selfish back then.”*

The thematic map shown in Figure 1 also illustrates the relationships between the subthemes “Learning from other’s experiences,” “Accepting race and gender identity,” and “Social Work” that lead support to another main theme identified in this study namely “Heightened Self-Awareness.”

### 3.2.2. Heightened self-awareness

Most subjects in this public event shared their lived experiences and talked about how gradual self-awareness had shaped their understanding about what social justice meant to them. A common subtheme under this overarching theme of “Heightened Self-Awareness” was the subtheme of “Learning from other’s experiences.” For example, a participant mentioned:

*“Someone else in our class talked about the neighborhood that he came from. And he talked about how it was very easy in his neighborhood for young Hispanic men to get in trouble. So, he wanted to come to law school so that one, he could maybe help some of the people in his neighborhood that he grew up with. But number two, he wanted to be able to show the younger generation that there’s another way that there are good things that you can do and that you can go to school, you can become an attorney and you can contribute to your environment.”*

Another common subtheme under the overarching theme of “Heightened Self-Awareness” was the subtheme of “Accepting race and gender identity.” For example, a participant in this public event shared about their awakening to understanding social justice from the realization of how racial profiling works. They shared how an experience of a colleague was eye-opening to them stating:

*“She had been pulled over by a police officer and was racially profiled by this police officer and harassed” adding how this has made her want to “learn the tools that she would need so that other black women would not have to go through the same thing.”*

Taken together, the subthemes of “Powerful and Impactful Personal Experiences” and “Situational changes over time” lend support to the overarching theme of “Reflection from Life Events” and the subthemes “Learning from other’s experiences,” “Accepting race and gender identity” and “Social Work” lend support to the other main theme of “Heightened Self-Awareness,” to provide us with a succinct, consistent, rational, non-redundant, and engaging depiction of the data [16]. This is also in alignment with Checkpoints # 7 to 15 from the 15-Point Checklist of Criteria for Good TA suggested by Braun and Clarke that suggests that it is important that the researcher ensure that the data that has been “analyzed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just paraphrased or described” to ensure that the analysis and data are in sync – the extracts exemplify the analytic assertions and that the analysis narrates a persuasive and well-structured tale about the data and subject, thus creating a fine equilibrium between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts. This confirms that sufficient time has been devoted to thoroughly complete all stages of the analysis, without hastily finishing a phase or merely skimming over it.

### 3.3. Reflections from the TA

Conducting a TA of the public data helped us identify two major themes that emerged from analyzing the personal stories and narratives of subjects who voluntarily shared about their journey and lived experiences in response to the open question “What does social justice mean to you?” Keeping our focus on our RQ about “How do

educators (in higher education settings) construct their meaning of social justice?” We were able to narrow down the emerging themes to two overarching and relevant ones that helped us understand that “Heightened Self-Awareness” and “Reflection from Life Events” play an important role in how educators (in higher education settings) have constructed and arrived at their meaning of social justice. This is very insightful and useful because understanding how people construct meaning about social justice using these themes can help with informed campus programming and with the design of events, activities, and opportunities that can advance social justice awareness among all the stakeholders in higher education.

## 4. PIA of the data

Supplementing the primary data analysis with a supplementary data analysis (a new lens) of the same data can help boost the credibility (and thus trustworthiness) of the findings and conclusions drawn from the data analysis. Hence, to yield meaningful and usable insights from the qualitative data, the primary qualitative data analysis (TA in our case) can be supplemented with another form of qualitative analysis of the same data that can have the researcher “participate creatively in the reframing of data in order to bring the reader as close as possible to the original researcher/participant experiences” [21]. To that end, we utilize PIA to analyze our qualitative data to “more authentically express” the “human experiences” [21] and “complex realities” [22] shared by our study subjects and found in our data that would otherwise have remained unexplored and unmined.

As per [22], poetical thinking is a basic method of perceiving the world and what sets poetical thinking apart is its extension beyond a quest for knowledge or meaning into the sensory, outgoing and incoming, hard-to-comprehend, or articulate, experiential world. It gives rise to the complexities of sensed experiences. In the context of reflexivity and the voice of the researcher, [23] suggests that poetic thinking is the transformative force in the interaction between language form and life form. This transformative force comes into play when a subject dialogically constitutes itself in creative discourse, thereby altering our feelings, thoughts, or comprehension; in essence, how the world presents itself to us. In terms of qualitative research, [24] suggests that poetic thinking enables alternative types of data to provoke intense and profound emotional responses in the consumer of research because they hold the belief that poetry frequently has the ability to delve into experience more profoundly than prose. They illustrate this with an example, stating that qualitative researchers and practitioners who aim to comprehend the health-seeking behaviors of individuals from historically marginalized communities will discover that poetic thinking aids in the articulation of potent emotions that may not always be readily expressed in a straightforward or sequential manner.

For researchers interested in conducting a PIA, [21] offers a six-step guide to undertaking the analysis (see Table 3). It is also important to begin the investigation with a RQ that will guide the PIA. To that end, we found the flexibility, structure, and rigor offered by PIA to be a more aligned data analysis method (in comparison to dialectical or diagrammatic) for our investigation guided by the question: How do educators (in higher ed. settings) construct their meaning of social justice?

For our data analysis presented in this section, we will focus on the method of PIA as drafted and shared by [21] since it is particularly suited to our research goals of finding patterns (viz. Social Justice) “of shared meaning organized around a central concept” that is “derived from the data that informs the research” [10].

**Table 3**  
**Poetic inquiry and analysis [21]**

Step	
1	Read the transcripts during data collection and undertake preliminary data analysis so that you gain information on all aspects of the research question.
2	When all the data is in, re-read the transcripts together with any other data gathered (observations, visual and written documents) and make notes identifying themes.
3	Develop files of the themes noted, keeping to the words of the subjects if data is in interview transcripts or videotapes.
4	Order and reorder these themes.
5	Transform them into the poetic or combined styles that best portray the response to the research question.
6	Read aloud or display to others to gauge the effect.

#### 4.1. Our systematic approach towards conducting a trustworthy PIA on the data

The purpose and goal of our research is to “see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences” so that we can come to identify “what is common to the way” social justice is talked about by the research subjects [8]. So, to complete a PIA analysis of our qualitative data (transcripts of personal stories shared by our subjects), we followed the six-step guide proposed by [21]:

##### 4.1.1. Step 1: Read the transcripts

As was discussed earlier in this paper, our data were public data and so we embarked on the analysis equipped with some pre-existing understanding of the data and a few preliminary analytical ideas/concepts. [21] states that poetic inquiry gives rise to a unique voice – a voice that is not solely of the researcher or the subject of research, but a fusion of both. The researcher plays a significant role in molding this distinctive voice. So, following advice, we documented our thoughts, interpretations, and questions (in our reflexive journal) during the data collection and that marked the beginning of our PIA analysis. It is crucial for the researcher to delve deeply into the data to acquaint themselves with the comprehensive scope and detail of the content [13] and so we repeatedly read through our entire data/transcripts in an active way to become very familiar with it so that we could acquire knowledge encompassing every facet of the RQ. We also engaged with the data “analysis as a faithful witness to the accounts in the data” while also “being honest and vigilant” about our own “perspectives, pre-existing thoughts, and beliefs.” [15]. To ensure the trustworthiness for Step 1 of our PIA, we followed the advice shared with qualitative researchers by [16] and paid careful attention to ensure the accuracy of the transcription process. We did not use a software for the transcription and instead did it manually, and so every time we read the transcript (when reengaging with our data for data familiarity), we also simultaneously listened to the audio file so that we could re-verify the accuracy of our transcriptions. There were, in total, five instances when we had to edit our transcript for accuracy as a direct result of this re-verification engagement and this process,

though time-consuming it assisted us in ensuring that the transcript preserves the necessary information from the spoken narrative, and in a manner that is faithful to its inherent character that includes the use of punctuation to retain the meaning of what was being said. This phase was time-consuming because we had to revisit the verbal data recording several times to check our transcripts to check for accuracy in order to capture the “true” and “original nature” of the verbal account, but it has made us very confident and familiar with our transcribed data.

##### 4.1.2. Steps 2 and 3: Re-read the transcripts and organize the themes and quotations

For these stages, [21] suggests that the researcher should scour the data for words, phrases, and paragraphs to gather into themes that encapsulate the core of the experiences. Closely following [21], recommendations, given in Table 4, are a part of our transcribed data (left-hand column) that also has our identified “essence of the transcript relating to “path to an awakening” that is grouped” under the theme of “social justice (right-hand column)” showing the early phases of poetic metamorphosis of our data. Do note that the decisions taken reveal both the researcher and the subject of research, illustrating their interdependence [21]. This is because we had previously undertaken TA (ref: Data Analysis# 1) that allowed us to fill in the coded segments into broad areas like “Situational changes over time,” “Learning from other’s experiences,” “Accepting race and gender identity,” etc., Then, within each theme, we have strived (for PIA) to capture the “crux” of the experience using solely the participant’s verbal expressions, akin to a photographer adjusting the camera angle to depict a different facet of the individual without altering the actual image – merely modifying the light source [21].

##### 4.1.3. Steps 4 and 5: Order and reorder the themes to create a poem guided by the RQ

For the poems (presented later in this document) derived from the data (the transformative process of Step 4), we followed the recommendations provided by [25] who has suggested the following:

- “The language” in the poem should be directly sourced from the interviewees – voiced by the subject.
- “Repetition” of thematic words may be employed when the situation calls for additional clarity or emphasis, or to underscore a matter.
- “Trailing off”, or Fading out, or taking a pause to decelerate a narrative, or enjambment – where individuals spoke rapidly and without interruptions, can be incorporated in the poem where applicable (at the discretion of the researcher).
- “Stumblings,” or hesitations, or lack of eloquence and the quest for articulation if present in the transcripts can be depicted as they are in the transcript.

Using [25] suggestions, we used a combination of subject voice, researcher’s decisions informed by field notes, and creative freedom in the poems that we present below. Our study subjects, Ken, Stacy, and Mark, all had unique experiences in their journey to discovering what social justice meant to them – as can be seen in the poems that are given below. For Ken’s experiences, we use “narrative poetry” and the “story portrait” has “a beginning, middle, and an end” and is “close to the spoken word” [21].

##### Ken found his signpost.

1. Not a man of faith, Ken did not believe in color,
2. He had spent most of his life in the city living in an ivory tower;
3. Hard work was his religion and he believed that hard work pays,

**Table 4**  
**Subject-voice and researcher-informed themes for poetic inquiry and analysis**

Transcript excerpt from participant Ken's personal story	Organize the quotations (pre-write for poem)	Researcher's field notes
<p>"Now the God's Kitchen is a place in Anytownville where meals are served to the homeless and people that maybe just don't have the means to eat otherwise. And I walk in on the first day and I'm just kinda all down in the dumps because here's a Saturday that I could be watching basketball or still sleeping, and I have to do this service work. But I very quickly realized something that helping other people is so powerful. And it's something that is so needed. Easy for me putting spaghetti on a plate and then handing that to you is a mild annoyance. But for the people I was doing it for, some of them, it may have been the best thing that happened to them the whole day. And as I work and I did that work in that place, every day I saw people come in with gratitude and people that just were so sincere. And through that period, I realized and I found my signpost that I found my awakening. My awakening was doing for other people. My awakening was using my platform to help others. And that's what social justice is. It's working to help others, working to help other people."</p>	<p>people that maybe just don't have the means to eat otherwise I could be watching basketball or still sleeping. Helping other people is so powerful. And it's something that is so needed. For some of them, it may have been the best thing that happened to them the whole day. I saw people come in with gratitude and people that just were so sincere. My awakening was using my platform to help others. And that's what social justice is.</p>	<p>Participant is African American Mostly lived a protected and privileged life. Did not believe in racial discrimination and thought them to be the thing of the past. Did not understand what homelessness was and did not care to find out. A volunteering experience changes his outlook.</p>

**Table 5**  
**Mark's Cinquain**

<p>Line 1 has one word (the title) Line 2 has two words that describe the title Line 3 has three words that tell the action Line 4 has four words that express the feeling Line 5 has one word, which recalls the title</p>	<p>Self-reflection Life lessons Maturity and Wisdom Thinking about your journey. Self-understanding</p>	<p align="center"><b>Mark's Cinquain</b></p>  <p>Self-Reflection Life lessons Maturity and Wisdom Thinking about your journey. Self-understanding</p>
---	---	--

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>4. Life was fair and just and all you had to do was follow honest ways;<br/>5. Then one day, as Ken was headed back home from work,<br/>6. Following the law, maintaining his speed he tailgated a truck;<br/>7. Then when the truck took a detour to avoid a traffic stop,<br/>8. He inadvertently took the turn too and ran into a cop;<br/>9. The truck driver was white and the cops let him go with a warning,</p> | <p>10. Ken was black, and to him the cops did come storming;<br/>11. He was ticketed, manhandled, and mercilessly sent to court,<br/>12. Where a good lawyer could get him community service to clean out his report;<br/>13. This was the first time that Ken had faced racial discrimination,<br/>14. It was starting to change his understanding and his interpretation;<br/>15. He still wanted to believe that the world was just and fair,</p> |
|--|--|

16. And off to the community service required of him, he headed with despair;
17. God's Kitchen that serves food to the homeless is where he had to serve,
18. This was the first time he had stepped out of the city and into the suburb;
19. "I could be watching basketball or still sleeping" he thought as he entered the kitchen,
20. He had no understanding of why and what the God's Kitchen did and what was its mission;
21. As he put spaghetti on a plate and then handed them to people waiting eagerly,
22. He started to retrospect about his life of luxury that he had lived so regally;
23. He understood that this food helped feed people who had no other means to eat,
24. That there were people in this world who had lost all they had and now resided in the street;
25. As he saw homeless people come in with gratitude and people that just were so sincere,
26. He had found his signpost and his understanding of social justice by becoming a volunteer;
27. His bubble broken, he now understood that the world was not what he thought it was,
28. He also fully comprehended why it was necessary to support charities that serve a just cause;
29. His awakening was to use his social status and platform to help others in need,
30. And that's what social justice had become for Ken – it was in supporting good deeds.

For Stacy's experiences, we use a "Heroic couplet" which is "a poem with two" pairs of consecutive lines of metrically structured poetry with rhymes in iambic pentameter [21]. To give the readers a deeper understanding and the context to the Heroic couplet, we are including a small excerpt from Stacy's story. We analyzed Stacy's transcript similar to the analysis shown in Table 3 and that helped us in writing the "Heroic couplet" shared below (after the excerpt). As we keenly read through the transcript of Stacy's experiences as a tenure-track female faculty member who was defining and redefining what social justice meant to her, what stood out to us was her activist persona that gave her an heroic aura – like a heroine who was fighting for social justice while at the same time trying to make sense of why the evils existed in the first place. This superhuman side of her guided us in our selecting to write a "Heroic couplet" to address Stacy's activism.

*"I was a new Ph.D. graduate and my fellow research lab colleagues had received better salary offers than what I had received as we were interviewing for tenure-track jobs. When I inquired and researched about the salary difference between a male faculty member's starting salary and an equally qualified female faculty member's starting salary in academia, I was surprised to see the big pay gap and the blatant discriminatory practice in the higher ed. salary policies. I was shocked, but I was not going to be an audience to this discrimination."*

#### Stacy the Activist Heroine

1. As a woman in Higher Ed., I can see that Higher Ed. is fraught with bias,
2. From unequal pay to unequal rights, there is a need for an equal dais;
3. For social justice and human rights, yes, fight I will,
4. A bias-free world for all, yes, my wish I will fulfill.

For Mark's experiences, we use "Cinquain" which is "a poem with five lines" [21]. To give the readers a deeper understanding and the

context to the Cinquain, we are including a small excerpt from Mark's story. Mark's journey to understanding social justice was different from Ken's and Stacy's in that he found it as he better understood himself and his understanding of what justice means to him. We have tried to capture this essence in the "Cinquain" (see Table 5). Also, we analyzed Mark's transcript similar to the analysis shown in Table 3 and that helped us in writing the "Cinquain" shared below. While there were several interesting twists and turns in his story, ranging from personal loss to regret, we found the theme of self-discovery through self-reflection very powerful in his meaning-making of social justice (as it pertained to him) and so that is what we used as our inspiration that guided our writing in this "Cinquain."

Also, the [21] text encourages the use of images to supplement the poems if the images can help add more insight (for the readers) to the analysis. So, we added an image to Mark's Cinquain since we felt it added more insight to how Mark was feeling – as his journey was that of self-discovery.

#### 4.1.4. Step 6: Read aloud to others

For this final step, we read aloud these poems to two of our colleagues (colleagues/teachers at our workplace) to seek their feedback and to test if they could identify the underlying themes in the poems. Both colleagues could identify the underlying themes, viz Heightened Self-Awareness – with Ken found his signpost and Stacy the Activist Heroine and Reflection from Life Events with Ken found his signpost and Mark's Cinquain.

## 5. Discussion: Bringing It All Together

In this research work, we presented our data analysis using both TA and PIA that helped us present and then re-present the major themes that emerged from analyzing the personal stories and narratives of subjects who voluntarily shared about their journey and lived experiences in response to the open question "What does social justice mean to you?". Keeping our focus on our RQ about "How do educators (in higher education settings) construct their meaning of social justice?" we were able to first examine and then reexamine our qualitative data using "another form of thinking" that allowed for transcending linguistic and cultural ways of observing, articulating, and understanding, contrasting and rearranging ways of articulating and perceiving, in manners that exceed the limitations of any single language [22]. We could use the poems to explore the themes and enter into the experiences of our research subjects and make better connections to the stories they had shared including the emotions and feelings that they expressed. According to [26], "narrative and poetic rendering acts as an articulation of a journey of many routes. It is a storying of critical research issues and events as performances of lived experience. It is a métissage of hybrid, but interrelated, themes that find cohesion through fragmentation and coalescence, severance, and regrowth." Thus, "(c)reating poetic portraits allows scholars to communicate research findings in multidimensional and more accessible ways" [27]. Along the same lines, [28] makes a case for translating research into popular media to engage new audiences stating that "cultural milieu holds unprecedented possibilities for translating education research into varied forms to achieve greater public impact." In that vein, using PIA helped us better understand how the themes identified using TA i.e., "Heightened Self-Awareness" and "Reflection from Life Events" play an important role in how educators (in higher education settings) have constructed and arrived at their meaning of social justice. Taken together, the findings from the analysis (TA + PIA)

are very insightful and useful because understanding how people construct meaning about social justice using these themes can help with informed campus programming and with the design of events, activities, and opportunities that can advance social justice awareness among all the stakeholders in higher education. So, using a combination of TA and PIA (i.e., TAPIA), we are now able to extend “an invitation for others to enter the phenomenal world of human experience” [22] of our subjects that would have otherwise not been readily visible to the readers as it is now. To that end, in regard to conducting a thorough analysis, [29] conveyed that the ability to employ poetic language to summon both the lived experience and the narrative truth and to incite discovery/surprise/inspiration aids the research procedure by offering fresh understanding, imparting viewpoint, and/or promoting societal transformation. In regard to quality when doing a thorough analysis of the data, [30] share that adding an artistic analysis like poetic thinking and inquiry exhibits thoroughness and excellence through the emotional and esthetic reactions of audiences and guarantees quality by focusing on the participants’ real-life experiences, eliciting emotions, magnifying participants’ voices, promoting researcher self-reflection, and advocating for cooperative research and public scholarship. Finally, as we conclude this analysis, we find that the research has also changed the researcher (us). Taking advantage of poetic thinking and expression to share our position, we are including our researcher-voice poem below.

1. How social justice is understood, we wanted to find,
2. To understand lived life experiences is what we had in mind,
3. We entered the research space with some preconceptions,
4. Our subjects’ stories, my-oh-my, changed our perceptions.
5. Every sense-making journey that we heard was a unique one,
6. We are thankful that we went looking, or these stories will be known to none,
7. For some, participation in community service was the path to discovery,
8. For others it was self-realization that was a path to recovery.
9. Situations leading to heightened awareness was also a factor,
10. Many a time it was powerful personal experience or a close encounter,
11. Coming to terms with race, gender, and situational awareness was reflected in their tale,
12. Reconnecting with reality was mentioned by every subject, without fail.
13. Our study has made us wonder about our own journey in this context,
14. We went in confident and have now returned perplexed,
15. Looking back on the many experiences that we have had, now in new light,
16. As we sit down to analyze the data we find ourselves engulfed in hindsight.

## 6. Summary and Future Directions

In summary, the dual approach of TA and poetic inquiry was employed in this study to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of educators’ meaning-making and sense-making of social justice. TA allowed us to identify and categorize common patterns and themes in the data, providing a structured and systematic interpretation of the educators’ perspectives. On the other hand, poetic inquiry offered a more creative and empathetic lens, enabling us to capture the emotional depth and personal resonance of the educators’ experiences. The combination of these two methods was not meant to draw definitive conclusions, but

rather to illuminate the complexities and contradictions inherent in the topic of social justice in education.

It is our belief that the richness and diversity of the data cannot be fully captured by a single analytical approach. Therefore, the use of both TA and poetic inquiry allowed us to honor the multifaceted nature of the educators’ narratives, thereby contributing to a more holistic understanding of the subject matter.

While we appreciate the readers’ desire for clear-cut conclusions, with this two-pronged approach, we argue that the value of this study lies not in the provision of definitive answers, but in the exploration of the intricate and often ambiguous terrain of social justice in education. We hope that this research will serve as a catalyst for further dialogue and inquiry in this critical area of study.

## Ethical Statement

This study does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

## References

- [1] Brookfield, S. D. (2018). *Teaching race: How to help students unmask and challenge racism*. USA: John Wiley & Sons.
- [2] Brossard Børhaug, F., & Harnes, H. B. (2020). Facilitating intercultural education in majority student groups in higher education. *Intercultural Education*, 31(3), 286–299.
- [3] Valencia, R. R. (2010). *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. UK: Routledge.
- [4] Brunner, B. R. (2006). Student perceptions of diversity on a college campus: Scratching the surface to find more. *Intercultural Education*, 17(3), 311–317. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980600841751>
- [5] Clayton-Pedersen, A. R., Parker, S., Smith, D. G., Moreno, J. F., & Teragush, D. H. (2007). *Making a real difference with diversity*. USA: American Association of Colleges and Universities.
- [6] Dovidio, J. F., Gaertner, S. L., Kawakami, K., & Hodson, G. (2002). Why can’t we just get along? Interpersonal biases and interracial distrust. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 8(2), 88–102. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.8.2.88>
- [7] Hochschild, J. L. (1995). *Facing up to the American dream: Race, class and the soul of the nation*. USA: Princeton University Press.
- [8] Hurtado, S., Griffin, K. A., Arellano, L., & Cuellar, M. (2008). Assessing the value of climate assessments: Progress and future directions. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 1(4), 204.
- [9] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). USA: American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- [10] Kiger, M. E., & Varpio, L. (2020). Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE Guide No. 131. *Medical Teacher*, 42(8), 846–854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2020.1755030>

- [11] Alhojailan, M. I. (2012). Thematic analysis: A critical review of its process and evaluation. *West East Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(1), 39–47.
- [12] King, N. (2004). Using templates in the thematic analysis of text. In C. Cassell & G. Symon (Eds.), *Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research* (pp. 257–270). UK: Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446280119.n21>
- [13] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2023). Thematic analysis. In N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, M. D. Giardina & G. S. Cannella (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (6th ed., pp. 385–402). UK/USA: SAGE Publications. <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/index.php/output/10932269/thematic-analysis>
- [14] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. UK: Sage.
- [15] Starks, H., & Brown Trinidad, S. (2007). Choose your method: A comparison of phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(10), 1372–1380. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732307307031>
- [16] Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1609406917733847. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- [17] Côté, L., & Turgeon, J. (2005). Appraising qualitative research articles in medicine and medical education. *Medical Teacher*, 27(1), 71–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01421590400016308>
- [18] Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. USA: Sage.
- [19] Labra, O., Castro, C., Wright, R., & Chamblas, I. (2020). Thematic analysis in social work: A case study. *Global Social Work-Cutting Edge Issues and Critical Reflections*, 10(6), 1–20.
- [20] Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, 9(3), 33501–33514.
- [21] Grbich, C. (2012). *Qualitative data analysis: An introduction* (2nd ed.). UK: Sage.
- [22] Freeman, M. (2017). *Modes of thinking for qualitative data analysis*. UK: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315516851>
- [23] Pajević, M. (2014). Translation and poetic thinking. *German Life and Letters*, 67(1), 6–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/glal.12028>
- [24] Furman, R. (2006). Poetic forms and structures in qualitative health research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 16(4), 560–566. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732306286819>
- [25] Connelly, K. (2010). ‘What body part do I need to sell?’: Poetic re-presentations of experiences of poverty and fear from low-income Australians receiving welfare benefits. *Creative Approaches to Research*, 3(1), 16–41. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.063632578460773>
- [26] Swanson, D. M. (2009). Roots/routes, part I. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 15(1), 49–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800408321631>
- [27] Hill, D. A. (2005). The poetry in portraiture: Seeing subjects, hearing voices, and feeling contexts. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(1), 95–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800404270835>
- [28] Woo, Y. Y. J. (2008). Engaging new audiences: Translating research into popular media. *Educational Researcher*, 37(6), 321–329. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X08324229>
- [29] Faulkner, S. L. (2017). Poetic inquiry: Poetry as/in/for social research. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *The handbook of arts-based research* (pp. 208–230). USA: Guilford Press.
- [30] Fernández-Giménez, M. E., Jennings, L. B., & Wilmer, H. (2019). Poetic inquiry as a research and engagement method in natural resource science. *Society & Natural Resources*, 32(10), 1080–1091. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2018.1486493>

**How to Cite:** Iyer, I. N., & Ramachandran, S. (2024). Thematic Analysis and Poetic Inquiry of Educators’ Meaning-Making and Sense-Making of Social Justice. *International Journal of Changes in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.47852/bonviewIJCE42023003>